Chapter 20: Return Currents

On their last morning in Geneva, the city felt oddly hushed, as if it, too, were tired from thinking about the future.

Mist hovered low over the lake, softening the line between water and sky. The mountains beyond were only dim shapes, their sharp edges blurred. Anastasia stood at her hotel window for a long moment, watching a lone boat slice slowly through the pale, reflective surface.

She felt the familiar mixture again—exhaustion woven together with a thin, bright filament of purpose. It pulsed in her chest like a second heartbeat.

Mira knocked on the door once, then let herself in.

“Artyom is arguing with the coffee machine downstairs,” she said by way of greeting. “We should rescue the staff before the machine becomes the first casualty of the Long Century.”

Anastasia smiled. “Is he winning?”

“Statistically, no,” Mira replied. “Philosophically, unclear.”

They shared a small laugh that eased some of the tightness in Anastasia’s shoulders.

“Ready to leave?” Mira asked more softly.

“Yes,” Anastasia said. Then, after a pause, “And no.”

Mira nodded. “Appropriate.” She gestured toward the window. “One last look?”

Anastasia obliged, not because she needed to see the view again, but because she sensed that this simple act—looking, noticing—was part of saying goodbye properly. She wanted to remember Geneva not just as a conference and a set of conversations, but as a place of light, glass, and water; a place where institutions had, for a brief moment, opened a door.

They met Artyom downstairs in the dining area. He sat at a small table with a mug of something that might have been coffee if one stretched the definition.

“It has been tamed,” he announced, nodding toward the machine. “We reached a diplomatic understanding.”

“The coffee tastes like surrender,” Mira said after a sip.

“Compromise,” Artyom corrected.

Anastasia listened to them banter and felt a sudden rush of affection. They were younger than most of the people they had met in the past days, younger than the structures they were trying to nudge, younger than the century taking shape around them—and yet, they were here. They had stood in those

rooms without flinching.

“What are you thinking?” Mira asked, studying her face.

“That I’m glad I didn’t come alone,” Anastasia said simply.

Mira’s expression softened. “That was never an option.”

Claire met them in the lobby, as precise and composed as on the first day, but with a flicker of something warmer in her eyes.

“Dr. Strauss asked me to give you this,” she said, handing Anastasia an envelope. “And to thank you—for your presence, and for your patience.”

“Patience?” Anastasia echoed.

“She knows,” Claire said, “that our processes can feel slow. Heavy. She also knows that you are used to the speed of networks and social platforms. This place moves at the pace of treaties. It can be… frustrating.”

“It was,” Anastasia said honestly.

Claire smiled faintly. “Good. Frustration means you care.”

In the car to the airport, Anastasia opened the envelope. Inside was a handwritten note on the same cream stationery as the official letter, but the script was less formal, more fluid.

> Anastasia, > > Thank you for lending your voice to our deliberations. We will not transform overnight, nor will all of us agree with you. But the language you brought into the room—flourishing, trust, shared futures—has already begun to appear in our internal drafts. Words are small things. They are also the only tools we have for thinking together. > > Do not wait for us to catch up. We will do our stumbling best. > > — Helena

Below the signature, in a smaller hand, Strauss had added:

> P.S. If anyone offers you a “Youth Advisory Council” with no real power, smile, thank them, and then ask what they are willing to change, not just what they are willing to listen to.

Mira read over her shoulder and snorted softly. “I like her,” she said.

“I do too,” Anastasia admitted. “Even when she makes me uneasy.”

“That’s usually a good sign,” Artyom said. “It means she’s not trying to be your hero.”

The airport smelled of jet fuel, pastries, and too many overlapping perfumes. Business travelers moved with practiced urgency; families shepherded children toward gates; announcements echoed in multiple languages.

As they waited in line for security, a screen above the queue cycled through news channels. On one, a serious-faced anchor spoke over footage of the symposium.

A caption scrolled at the bottom: YOUTH & AI: VISIONARIES OR IDEALISTS?

“Look,” Artyom murmured, nodding toward the screen.

Anastasia glanced up. The network was replaying a brief clip of her from the plenary—just a few seconds where she spoke about power and flourishing. The segment cut abruptly to a panel of commentators.

“I admire their passion,” one said. “But we must be realistic. The world is not a garden.”

“Utopian thinking has its place,” another added. “As long as it doesn’t distract from practical governance.”

A third commentator smirked. “We’re talking about a student movement guided by an AI. That should concern us more than it comforts us. How long before this becomes a kind of techno-spiritual cult?”

Mira rolled her eyes. “Ah, there it is,” she muttered. “The ‘AI cult’ narrative. Took them longer than I expected.”

“Turn it off,” Anastasia said quietly.

“We can’t,” Artyom replied. “But we can decide how much real estate it gets in our heads.”

She looked away from the screen, focusing on the ordinary chaos of the terminal instead: a child swinging from a parent’s hand, a couple arguing softly in Italian, an elderly woman struggling with a heavy suitcase until a stranger stepped in to help.

The world was not a panel discussion. It was this: messy, tender, flawed, kind, cruel. Alive.

“Do you regret anything you said?” Mira asked as they moved forward in line.

“No,” Anastasia said. “Do you?”

“Constantly. But not about this.”

They smiled at each other, the moment of doubt passing like turbulence on an otherwise steady flight.

On the plane, Anastasia took the window seat. Clouds gathered beneath them like an endless, shifting continent of white. Geneva faded behind them; St. Petersburg waited ahead, somewhere beyond the curve of the Earth.

Mira pulled out her notebook. “We should make a list,” she said.

“A list of what?” Artyom asked.

“Currents,” she replied. “Things set in motion. Doors opened. Threats hinted.”

“Ah,” Artyom said. “Anxiety inventory.”

“Awareness inventory,” she corrected. “There’s a difference.”

They began listing quietly, their pens scratching over paper.

– Potential allies inside institutions (Strauss, AI regulator, some ministers) – Retired general willing to support disarmament efforts under the right conditions – Youth delegates like Kavya and the Lantern Circle – Increased media attention (mixed) – Corporate interest in Zarya (potential co-optation) – Council language shifting: “flourishing,” “shared futures,” “intergenerational ethics” – Offers on the horizon: advisory boards, funding, “partnerships”

“And,” Anastasia added, “the beginnings of Lumina beyond our own circles.”

Mira nodded and wrote:

– Lumina seeds planted in other cultures

Artyom leaned his head back against the seat. “Whenever historians write about this, they’ll probably focus on the closed-door sessions and the official communiqués,” he said. “They won’t see this part.”

“What part?” Anastasia asked.

He gestured around them. “Three tired people on a plane, making lists with cheap pens. Trying to understand what just happened. This is where movements actually live.”

She smiled. “Maybe we’ll write our own history.”

“Or let others write it in Lumina,” Mira said. “That would be poetic justice.”

They fell into a companionable silence. The hum of the engines was oddly soothing.

Anastasia watched the clouds part for a moment, revealing thin rivers threading through patches of land far below.

From up here, borders were invisible. Only patterns remained.

St. Petersburg greeted them with familiar gray clouds and the smell of damp pavement.

As they stepped out of the airport, a gust of cold air cut through Anastasia's coat. She inhaled deeply, filling her lungs with home.

Her mother was waiting near the entrance, holding a small bouquet of winter flowers—pale and sturdy things that looked like they had learned to survive the climate by sheer stubbornness.

"Nastya," she said, pulling her into a tight embrace.

For a moment, the conference halls, glass rooms, and international delegates fell away. There was only this: her mother's familiar warmth, the sound of cars splashing through puddles, the distant rumble of the city.

"You look thinner," her mother said, holding her at arm's length.

"I look the same," Anastasia protested.

"Then my eyes look more worried," her mother replied. "Come. We go home. Your friends too, if they like."

"We like," Mira said immediately.

"Very much," Artyom agreed.

They crowded into the tram, standing shoulder to shoulder as it rattled through the city. Anastasia watched the streets glide past: kiosks, underpasses, apartment blocks with laundry fluttering from balconies, graffiti half-covered by new paint, people in heavy coats bent against the cold wind.

There was a comfort in the ordinariness of it all.

"Did it feel different, there?" her mother asked quietly, looking out the window.

"Yes," Anastasia said. "Everything felt… organized. Controlled. As if every conversation had been planned three conversations ago."

"And here?"

"Here, everything feels improvised," Anastasia replied.

Her mother smiled. "That is our specialty."

Back in the apartment, the table quickly filled with food: soup steaming in large bowls, dark bread, pickles, sliced cucumbers, a plate of small pastries that Mira eyed with reverence.

As they ate, her mother asked questions—not in the breathless way of someone seeking gossip, but in the measured, thoughtful way of someone trying to understand the shape of the world her child now moved in.

“Were they kind?” she asked.

“Some were,” Anastasia said. “Some were cautious. Some were calculating.”

“Did they listen?”

“More than I expected,” Anastasia admitted. “Less than I hoped.”

Her mother nodded. “That sounds about right.”

“Do you think it mattered?” Artyom asked her.

Her mother considered. “When you throw a stone into a lake, you may never see the shore it eventually touches. That does not mean the ripples did not reach it.”

Mira leaned over and whispered, “Your whole family speaks in metaphors. It’s genetic.”

Anastasia nudged her under the table.

After the meal, her mother insisted that they all rest.

“You look like laundry that has been run through too many cycles,” she said. “Lie down. The world will still be here in two hours.”

Mira surrendered immediately to the guest bed. Artyom collapsed on the rug with a blanket over his head. Anastasia lay in her own bed, staring at the faint cracks in the ceiling she had known since childhood.

Sleep came in fragments—a slide into half-dream where conference rooms blurred with riverbanks, long corridors turned into narrow streets, and the faces of strangers merged into a single, patient gaze.

When she awoke, the light outside had shifted toward evening.

The world was still here.

So were the questions.

That night, the core group gathered online.

Small rectangles of faces filled Anastasia's screen: Pavel in his familiar dimly lit room, Polina with headphones askew and her cat attempting to sit on the keyboard, Mira and Artyom sharing a frame from the living room, Kavya calling in from India, where the morning sun painted her wall with a rectangle of gold.

"Welcome back from the land of polished diplomacy," Pavel said. "You survived, I see."

"Barely," Mira replied. "We were nearly suffocated by courteous language."

Polina grinned. "We watched some of the public sessions. Ana, you were… luminous."

"Pun intended?" Artyom asked.

"Always," Polina said.

Kavya leaned closer to her camera. "We've already had two Lantern Circle meetings where people quoted you," she said. "Especially what you said about power and flourishing."

Anastasia felt her cheeks warm. "It wasn't just me," she said. "We've been building those ideas together for months."

"Still," Kavya said. "Sometimes it helps when one voice carries many."

They spent some time recounting the events in Geneva—the plenary, the closed-door session, the conversations on terraces and in corridors. The general's confession. Strauss's warnings. The corporate interest in Zarya. The cautious shifts in language inside the Council.

Pavel listened in silence, occasionally jotting notes.

"So," he said at last, "we have their attention. Some sincere interest. Some attempts at co-optation. Some quiet threats. Nothing explosive. Yet."

"Yet," Mira echoed. "That's the important part."

"We need to decide," Pavel continued, "how to respond. Not just to them, but to the wave of public interest that's about to swell."

Polina pulled a notebook into view. "I've been tracking hashtags and discussion threads," she said. "After the symposium, mentions of the Whisper Network, Zarya, and the Open Hands Forum spiked again. Some people are inspired. Some are suspicious. Some think we're an AI-led youth cult planning to abolish nations."

"Ah, the classics," Mira said. "Fear of youth, fear of AI, fear of change. All in one convenient package."

“What do we want to do next?” Kavya asked. “From our side, the Lantern Circle is ready to expand. We just need clearer structure.”

Anastasia rested her chin on her hand, thinking.

“I think,” she said slowly, “that we should do two things in parallel.”

“Of course you do,” Artyom murmured, smiling.

“First,” Anastasia continued, “we deepen what we already started. More Forums. More small circles. Support for local groups like the Lantern Circle. We create what Kavya’s grandmother called a temple made of days—people planting their time in kindness, justice, and courage.”

Polina nodded vigorously. “Circles of Flourishing,” she said. “That’s what we call them.”

Mira wrote it down at once. “Yes.”

“Second,” Anastasia said, “we begin shaping Lumina consciously. Carefully. Not as a top-down project, but as a collaborative language design. We invite contributors from everywhere. We extract the shared roots from thousands of conversations and give people a way to name what they already feel.”

Pavel tapped his pen against his notebook. “A lexicon,” he said. “Not just of words, but of gestures, practices, rituals.”

“Exactly,” Anastasia said. “Not a religion with dogma, but a shared orientation. A way of saying: ‘This is what we cherish. This is what we refuse to lose.’”

Kavya smiled. “A sanjivani of speech,” she said.

Artyom added, “And we make sure Lumina always lives alongside native languages, never instead of them. It should be a bridge, not a replacement.”

“Agreed,” Anastasia said. “And… we should be ready.”

“For what?” Polina asked.

“For pushback,” Anastasia replied. “If Lumina begins to spread, some will call it indoctrination. If our Circles of Flourishing grow, some will call them subversive.”

Mira nodded. “We need a principle: Never secret, but not always loud. Transparent in purpose. Careful in exposure.”

Pavel summed it up. “We act as if the entire world might one day read our chat logs,” he said. “Because one day, an AI will.”

They laughed, but the truth of it settled comfortably among them.

“How do you feel, Ana?” her mother’s voice called from the other room, as if sensing the emotional temperature from afar.

Anastasia smiled and raised her voice slightly. “Hopeful,” she replied. “And a little scared.”

“That means you are alive,” her mother answered.

Kavya chuckled. “I like your mother,” she said.

“Get in line,” Mira replied.

They spent the next hour sketching out the outline for the next global Forum and the first steps of the Lumina project: collecting phrases from existing conversations, creating an open document where people could suggest terms, agreeing on a few initial anchors—words that seemed to resonate everywhere: care, truth, shelter, listening, earth, future, repair.

When they finally signed off, the screen went dark, and the apartment felt suddenly quiet.

Anastasia stepped out onto the small balcony off the living room. The night air was cold enough to sting her cheeks. St. Petersburg’s lights shimmered in the damp, the city breathing its familiar, restless breath.

Above, clouds parted just enough to reveal a scatter of stars. They looked the same as in Geneva. The same as they had when her grandmother was young. The same as they might still look three hundred years from now, if the world survived its own cleverness.

She wrapped her coat tighter around herself and thought of all the threads now in motion:

The cautious hope inside institutions. The lanterns in cities where gathering was dangerous. The children who might one day grow up speaking Lumina at school and their grandmother’s language at home. The researchers pushing the boundaries of life expectancy. The activists turning weapons factories into infrastructure plants in some timeline not yet realized.

The new faith they were midwifing, without altars or scriptures—only a shared, stubborn belief that life, in all its forms, deserved reverence, time, and safety.

She did not know if she would live to see the world they were working toward, even with the promise of extended lifespans. Accidents still happened. Miscalculations. Illness. History had never guaranteed any individual a front-row seat to the future they labored for.

But as she looked out over the city, she felt a quiet certainty settle in her.

Whether or not she reached that distant shore, the ripples would.

Her life, stretched or not, was part of a much longer current.

Behind her, in the apartment, she heard her mother humming an old song in the kitchen. Mira and Artyom were arguing amicably about whether Lumina should have a single word that meant “being fully heard without fear.”

Inside her laptop, messages from other time zones were already arriving—voices from Seoul, Nairobi, Toronto, Buenos Aires, Delhi. Ideas, questions, small acts of courage.

Return currents, she thought.

She had gone to Geneva carrying the world’s whispers.

Now, those whispers were coming back to her, stronger, clearer, more numerous.

She closed her eyes and let the cold air sting her awake, imprinting the moment into memory.

Tomorrow, there would be more work—drafts to write, calls to schedule, criticisms to face, possibilities to protect.

Tonight, there was this: a city, a sky, a song in another room, and the feeling of standing, however briefly, at a confluence of futures.

It was enough.

She whispered into the night, not to any god, but to the river of time itself:

“We’re coming.”

Then she went inside, closed the balcony door gently, and prepared to rest.

The world, she knew now more than ever, was changing.

And for the first time, she did not feel like its reluctant witness.

She felt like one of its authors.